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Comprehensive review of the post structure of the United Nations Secretariat

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The General Assembly, in its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, requested the Secretary-General to undertake a comprehensive review of the post structure of the Secretariat, taking into account, inter alia, the introduction of new technology, and to make proposals in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 to address the top-heavy post structure of the Organization. The post structure was reviewed in the context of the preparation of the proposed programme budget and the results were presented in paragraphs 19 to 30 of the Introduction to that document. In its resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly noted with concern that the requested comprehensive review had not been submitted, and reiterated that the review be submitted to it at its fifty-seventh session.

The present report presents the main findings of the review. The main conclusion that could be drawn from the review is that, from the point of both internal and external comparisons, the current post structure and distribution of posts in the Secretariat does not indicate any apparent anomalies that could be characterized as top-heaviness of the Secretariat structure vis-à-vis comparative post structures in other major international organizations.

The issue of the post structure of the Secretariat will be kept under review and reported to the General Assembly in the context of the biennial programme budgets, as appropriate. The General Assembly may wish to take note of the present report.

* Submission of the report was delayed because of the need to obtain input from a number of national and international organizations.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, requested the Secretary-General to undertake a comprehensive review of the post structure of the Secretariat, taking into account, inter alia, the introduction of new technology, and to make proposals in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 to address the top-heavy post structure of the Organization. The post structure was reviewed in the context of the preparation of the proposed programme budget and the results were presented in paragraphs 19 to 30 of the Introduction. In its resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly noted with concern that the comprehensive review had not been submitted, and reiterated that the review be submitted to it at its fifty-seventh session.

2. In response to that request, and in conjunction with the Secretary-General's programme for the strengthening of the Organization, a comprehensive review of the post structure of the United Nations Secretariat was conducted with the assistance of a consultant. A summary of the review undertaken and the key findings of the review are contained in the present report.

II. Rationale and general approach

3. The review was prompted by the General Assembly's concerns about top-heaviness in the United Nations Secretariat. In response to those concerns, the Secretary-General included a review of the post structure in his action plan for the strengthening of the Organization. The Office of Human Resources Management was directed to oversee the review under the auspices of the Deputy Secretary-General. The first step was to test and validate the assumptions of top-heaviness and identify reasons and justifications for any imbalances.

4. There is no single, generally accepted definition or quantitative measure of top-heaviness. Different organizations have different structural needs, depending on their missions, functions, governing structures, cultures, policies and practices. Therefore the approach taken was to consider the issue from four perspectives: (a) internal comparisons over time and across departments; (b) external comparisons with comparable organizations; (c) general organizational measures as reported in management literature; and (d) the impact and effectiveness of current post control mechanisms.

III. Objective, scope and methodology

5. The objective of the review was to provide the data, information and analysis needed to assess the balance and appropriateness of the current United Nations post structure and to identify any further action required. It was neither a comprehensive organizational analysis at the departmental level, nor a review of job classification.

6. The focus of the review was on the D-1 level and above, although statistics for other levels were provided for perspective. The study covered posts at the Secretariat in New York and at the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. Posts funded through the peacekeeping support account were included, but

not military or civilian posts assigned to specific peacekeeping missions. The methodology included:

(a) Extraction of relevant statistics from budget documents prepared by the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts and from reports produced by the Office of Human Resources Management;

(b) Interviews with the Deputy Secretary-General and officials in the Office of Human Resources Management and the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts;

(c) Design and conduct of a brief survey of selected international organizations and governmental ministries;

(d) Review of various documents and reports of the General Assembly, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the International Civil Service Commission and departments of the Secretariat;

(e) Review of current literature on organizational theory.

Survey participants were selected on the basis of comparability of programmes and scope of activities, but with the understanding that equivalencies were inexact and subjective. The primary measure for both internal and external comparisons was the number of posts at D-1 level and above as a percentage of total posts.

IV. Major findings

A. Internal analysis

7. Viewed in isolation, the current post structure contains no bulges or anomalies in the pyramid that immediately suggest top-heaviness. The distribution of posts by department is generally consistent with the expectation that policy-making and representational functions require more high-level posts than do administrative and support functions. Viewed over a ten-year time frame (1992-2002), only the USG/ASG level has grown significantly — a net of nine posts. Eight were either new posts or conversions, generally the result of new programmes and changing priorities, three were reclassifications of existing D-2 posts, and two were abolished. Director (D-2/D-1) level posts from combined sources have decreased by 42 over the ten-year period, largely as a result of the restructuring and downsizing undertaken in the biennium 1998-1999. Differences between New York and other locations reflect the concentration at Headquarters of policy-making and common system responsibilities.

B. External analysis

8. The following international organizations participated in the survey conducted by the Secretariat to determine if the percentage of management posts at the Secretariat was significantly higher than in comparable organizations: Asian Development Bank, World Bank, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and European Commission. Information pertaining to other organizations in the United Nations system that was available in publications was also used. In addition, an attempt was made to gather data from specific

governmental ministries in order to facilitate comparisons with some of the major Secretariat departments.

9. The international organizations were viewed as having comparable policy-making responsibilities and relatively broad mandates. While there are no assurances that the organizations are properly structured, this is the closest that one could get to benchmark data for purposes of comparison. However, as with all comparisons, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn.

10. Comparability was determined using sample job descriptions or brief grade level definitions provided by the participant. Broad categories of responsibility and hierarchy were used to encompass several grade levels and to permit reasonable comparability under commonly understood headings.

11. In general, the results of the survey were positive. The Secretariat has a lower percentage of posts at the D-1 level and above (3.4 per cent) than the Asian Development Bank (5.6 per cent) and the European Commission (3.8 per cent), but higher than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2.9 per cent). Equivalency to the D-1 level could not be established with the World Bank because of its broadbanded pay grades. However, a comparison of regular budgetary posts at the P-5 equivalent and above in the two organizations showed the Secretariat to have a much smaller percentage of posts at those levels than did the Bank (11.9 per cent versus 18.9 per cent). A comparison with the grade distributions of major organizations of the United Nations system (the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency) showed the Secretariat to have a smaller percentage of management posts than any of the other United Nations organizations, except the International Atomic Energy Agency.

C. Organizational theory and standard measures

12. The broad mandate and policy-making focus of the United Nations make it difficult to apply such traditional standards as organizational layers and span of control, but these measures can still be useful indicators and informal targets in assessment and reform processes. Management literature reports an average of seven layers from top to bottom in large organizations, public and corporate, with five layers in the leanest organizations. It was not possible in the context of the present study to determine average layers for the Secretariat, but it would be an instructive exercise for managers. A structure with six layers would seem to be a useful target.

13. The literature reports a continuing trend towards wider spans of control. A ratio of 1:15 (one supervisor for every 15 staff) was established as a target for the United States Federal Government, compared to a 1:7 average span of control at the time that the study was undertaken. Based on an approximate calculation, the overall span of control for the Secretariat is approximately 1:10 for the regular budget and 1:12 for combined funding sources.

D. Organization and post controls

14. Brief interviews and the review of pertinent management reports suggested problems in several areas, including: (a) continuing pressures for classification upgrades; (b) lack of organizational guidelines and review processes; and (c) a microlevel budget approval process. The Office of Human Resources Management is considering, and in some cases already implementing, steps to reduce classification pressures and enhance and clarify promotional opportunities, and to establish a career development programme, generic job profiles, career bands, and managed mobility and rotation. (The European Commission has a particularly stringent mobility requirement for senior management.) As the emphasis shifts from job classification to career development, post control mechanisms may also need to change in order to prevent abuse and undue pressures on the promotion processes. Several member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development as well as United Nations organizations are decentralizing budget responsibilities so as to promote both flexibility and managerial self-discipline.

15. There is no clear responsibility or formal guidelines for organizational review. Decisions on new posts and reclassifications are often made in isolation rather than in the broader context of organizational standards and integrity. The Compensation and Classification Policy Unit generally does not have the guidelines or authority to question new layers of management. In the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management reform, new responsibility is proposed for the Department of Management in monitoring both budgetary and human resource activities, which should include adherence to organizational guidelines and targets.

16. The role of the Fifth Committee and the General Assembly in reviewing and approving new Professional posts and reclassifications individually as part of the budgetary process could be a factor contributing to the lack of a strategic focus in such a process. A more common approach is for governing bodies to monitor grade distribution and enforce post controls based on more global measures, such as percentages and ratios, rather than on individual actions in respect of posts.

V. Conclusions

17. While it was neither intended nor possible in the study to make a final pronouncement on the issue of top-heaviness in the Secretariat, the main conclusion that could be drawn from the review confirms that the current post structure and post distribution in the Secretariat does not indicate any apparent anomalies that could be characterized as top-heaviness when comparing the post structure and distribution statistics of the Secretariat with similar data of other international organizations. At the same time, the Secretary-General noted that, because of methodological issues, the review of the post structure in comparison with other international organizations was complicated. There was no single measure or generally accepted grade distribution that would provide a template for such an assessment. Also, there were no general theories of organizational design of practical application that could be relevant to the United Nations, bearing in mind its broad mandate and policy-making focus.

18. Another conclusion that was drawn from the review is that the Secretariat's post control mechanisms are working in the sense that new posts and upgrades are

limited. However, it was observed that there is a reliance on high-level restraint, for example, the Fifth Committee, rather than managerial self-discipline and accountability. The process itself creates tensions and frustrations that may have prompted some of the assumptions and concerns about top-heaviness that led to the present study.

19. The ongoing human resources reform effort should help to mitigate some of the pressures on job classification and, if combined with organizational guidelines and post control reforms, could help to reduce concerns about grade creep and top-heaviness in the structure.

20. The above conclusions are in line with the view of the Secretary-General, as outlined in his report on the strengthening of the United Nations (A/57/387 and Corr.1), that there is a need for an efficient, flexible system for allocating adequate resources to the Organization's priorities. In this context, the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 will take these issues into account so as to ensure that resources are allocated to programme priorities.

21. Clearly defined responsibilities, authorities, managerial accountabilities and review mechanisms are necessary in the delegation of authority to programme managers, a process which is at the centre of the Secretary-General's reform initiatives. At the same time, the Department of Management has a central role in ensuring that common organizational principles and policies are observed throughout the Secretariat and that the exercise of delegated authority is discharged within agreed guidelines, procedures and rules. As regards job classification reform, the International Civil Service Commission has proposed a number of innovations which would shift the emphasis towards more flexible recognition of the changing nature of work, as well as towards competencies and career development. Concerning possible alternative approaches to post control, the Secretary-General notes that performance reports and the results-based format of the programme budget provide an opportunity to review managerial accountability and budgetary responsibility against the yardstick of availability of human and financial resources.

22. The Secretary-General intends to keep the issues of post structure and distribution of posts in the Secretariat under review and to report in that regard to the General Assembly in the context of his biennial programme budgets, as appropriate.

VI. Recommendation

23. **The General Assembly may wish to take note of the present report.**